Chablis Pettus

Eng. 113-62

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Paper #1

Gender Benders

During the early twentieth century women were often oppressed by a dominating male culture. Seen as the more “genteel” sex, women were expected to be soft spoken daughters, accommodating wives and loving mothers. The three short stories “Sweat”, “A Jury of Her Peers”, and “A Rose for Emily”, illustrate the extreme pressures that were placed upon women during the turn of the century.

The three short stories mentioned above span three decades from1917 to1930. These were tumultuous times for women. Until 1920 women were not allowed to vote, own property if they were married or even leave their home without their husband’s permission. In 1880 Reverend Knox- Little of Church of St. Clements in Philadelphia made a speech declaring “Wifehood is the crowning glory of a woman. In it she is bound for all time. To her husband she owes the duty of unqualified obedience”, ( Hecker, Eugene .A Short History of Women’s Rights pg. 151) .The misogynistic undertone of Mr. Knox-Little’s speech demonstrates the cultures appreciation of women as mere property of men and intellectually unequal.

The short story “A Jury of Her Peers” is told in third person omniscient narration. The story was written by Susan Glaspell and published 1917. America was in the midst of World War I in 1917. Most men were summoned off to stateside military bases to train or Europe to fight. More women began working outside of the home as ticket takers, factory workers, stenographers, book keepers, cashiers, and railroad workers. (Seattle General Strike Project Website) Even though more than eight million women worked in America and paid taxes they were not have the right to vote. The law prohibiting women to vote exemplifies the prejudicial attitudes toward women in 1917.

“A Jury of Her Peers” is a short story that demonstrates what men thought of women. The story begins with two neighbors Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale preparing to pick up a few personal items for a neighbor (Mrs. Wright), who has been arrested for the alleged murder of her husband. The women were accompanied by a trio of men Mr. Hale, Mr. Peters, and Mr. Gorman. The men went to the house in their legal capacity, to investigate the murder of Mr. Wright.

During some points during the story Mrs. Wright is referred to by her maiden name “Minnie Foster”. When she is called Minnie Foster the characters depict her as a more cheerful person. “She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively—when she was Minnie foster, one of the town girls, singing in the choir. But that--oh, that was twenty years ago”. (Glaspell 320) Mrs. Wright’s clothes are now considered shabby. Mrs. Wright was depicted as a lovely, out going child, but when she married Mr. Wright she became a recluse. Mrs. Peters felt especially guilty for never coming to see Mrs. Wright even though she lived so nearby. Mrs. Hale felt that the reason she did not interact more was “S’pose she felt she couldn’t do her part; and then, you don’t enjoy things when you feel shabby.”(320)

The Wright’s entire house was shabby and cold. The crooked cupboard in the kitchen, the old shabby shawl on the door and the eerie quietness all added to the dankness of the house. The men, who were at the house to investigate a murder of Mr. Wright, but take it upon themselves to condemn her on her housekeeping abilities. They commented on dirty towels and broken preserve jars without thinking about what may have caused the gloomy house to be in such disarray. When Mrs. Hale defended Mrs. Wright, “There’s a great deal of work to be done on a farm” (Glaspell 230), Mr. Hale accused her of only being loyal to her sex. He did not take her interjection seriously because she was a woman and she was only being loyal to her neighbor.

Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale deeply empathized with Mrs. Wright. When they came across a piece of stitching Mrs. Hale pulled out the crooked thread and “replaced it with good”. (Glaspell 520). Replacing the stitch was an attempt by Mrs. Hale to help her during her moment of crisis. She wanted to convey to Mrs. Wright to know she understood and she and Mrs. Peters were supportive of her. They understood the plight of married women; they knew what it was like to careful can preserves and stitch quilts and most of all they knew that husbands did not understand.

While searching for the personal items to deliver to Mrs. Wright, the two women discover a birdcage with a broken door. The bird is a symbol of Mrs. Wright. “Plato’s well know allegory of the caged-birds in the Theatetus, for example, undoublty derives from a popular association of thought and soul ‘imprisoned ‘ in the cage of the body”. ( Sandwell, Berry. Logical Investigations pg. 292) The bird belonging in the cage was found wrapped in silk and hidden away in Mrs. Wright’s sewing basket. The birds had been violently killed presumably by Mr. Wright. The bird no doubt created the only sounds of happiness in the house. Along with Mrs. Wright’s stitching and preserves they were the only things that belong solely to her. The broken bird caged door is a represents the breaking of Mrs. Wrights spirit when the bird was killed. When he killed her bird she was

broken, she could not focus on her stitching or baking. Things were left undone because she did not have the wherewithal in her to continue to live.

The oppression place on Minnie Foster by Mr. Wright was so strong that it broke her spirit. The little life she had was brutally taken away. Her husband made her feel that she did not deserve to be happy. To protect Mrs. Wright from being charged for the murder, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters held withheld damning evidence-the dead bird, because only women who knew what she was going through could judge her- a jury of her peers. They did not know for certain but they knew it would have been justified if Minnie Foster decided that she had enough of Mr. Wright’s endless brutality and quietly and deliberately slipped a rope around his neck while he slept.

The short story “Sweat” by Zora Neale Hurston was published in 1926. During the roaring twenties millions of white women were regaling in obtaining the right to vote. They were working more diverse jobs and waiting later in life to marry. Social gains were occurring more slowly for black women; “In northern cities, they [black women] found it almost impossible to obtain any jobs that involved dealing with the public. Telephone companies and department stores refused to hire African American women as operators or clerks.” ( Goldberg, David. Discontented in America 1999 JHU Press pg. 110)

In “Sweat”, the main character is Delia Jones a poor, hard working black woman living in Florida. Her husband Skyes is an abusive adulterer who torments her every chance he gets. Delia works diligently as a wash woman to earn income to support herself and her monstrous husband. Skyes in the meantime lives as a man of leisure, entertaining a woman on the side.

Two months after marrying Delia, Skyes began to beat her viscously. Delia’s belief in God allowed her to stay with him despite his evil ways. A prayer she made illustrates that she thought God would return to Skyes all the meanness he had given to her, “Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil’s back, is got to come under his belly. Sometimes or ruther, Skyes, like everybody else is gointer reap his sowing”. She had developed a wall against his brutality and there was nothing he could do or say to hurt her. (Hurston 139)

Delia no longer had hope for being loved and she knew well of Skyes mistress Bertha, “Too late now to hope for love, even if it were not Bertha it would have been someone else.” (Hurston 131) Bertha was a large woman; it was known around the small community that Skyes was “crazy” about fat women. ( Hurston 184) “Fatness is used overwhelmingly to connote corruption of inner character, weakness, immaturity, and flaws that need to be fixed. (Rabinowitz, Rebecca. Fat Characters in Recent Young Adult Fiction, Kliatt Sept. 2003). Skyes was smitten with Bertha despite his marriage; she was living in the same town and thought he was the big shot in town. (Hurston 277)

All the hard work she had done other the years allowed Delia to buy the small house she and Skyes lived in. It wasn’t much but it was hers, so when Skyes brought a snake home to frighten Delia into leaving her refuge their relationship came to an abrupt end. “In Greek mythology snakes are often associated with dangerous antagonist”. (wikipedia.com) The rattling snake that he brought home to terrorize Delia became his killer. Skyes died at the hands of the snake and Delia watched him die. She regained the strength and self respect Skyes had stripped from her years earlier. She regained her life when the venom from Skye's own evil took his life.

“A Rose for Emily” written by William Faulkner was published in 1930. The narrator gives a first person account of the peculiar life of Emily, the main character. Emily is rich women living in a dark and dusty house. She lives a life secluded from the rest of the town and she seems to prefer things that way. Emily was reared by her father almost obsessively, she never married and for that reason, she seemed incomplete to the rest of the town.

After the death of her father Miss Emily, as she was known hardly ever left her housed. Townspeople finally had a reason to feel sorry for her. “Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized”. (Faulkner 98) Emily’s butler Tobe becomes her representative throughout the town. He ran her errands, did her shopping and kept her house. The butler grew old with Emily and he was unquestionably the only person alive who truly knew her idiosyncrasies.

Homer Barron was temporarily in town working as a contractor when he met Emily. Emily was taken with Mr. Barron; she seemed to beam with joy when in his presence. People thought that Emily would “persuade” Barron to marry her. The assumption that she had to persuade someone to marry her made Miss Emily a severely pathetic person.

Miss Emily character was lonely for intimate companionship all of her life. “We remembered all the young men her father had driven away”. (Faulkner106)

Emily could not let Mr. Barron get away, so she murdered him with rat poison and slept with the corpse until the day she died. This image paints a picture of a woman so desperate for male companionship that she resorted to necrophilia.

Women often treated as second class citizens and they did not garner equal rights until much later in the twenty century. Even when they did achieve civil rights they were often discriminate against and it was often by their own husbands. These three short stories illustrate how women fought to gain not only their civil rights but also their freedom.